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AUTHOR Willie, Charles V.
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a set of new ideas which support the value of school desegregation in the United States. First, school desegregation efforts have been almost universally effective, no matter what implementation strategy was employed. Even busing, although widely criticized, has been effective. Second, desegregation efforts have usually enhanced the educational environment for all students, regardless of race. Between 1967 and 1977, for example, the dropout rate of black students declined 50%; this change is related to desegregation. Similarly, high school enrollment and graduation statistics for whites have increased in the years since the "Brown" decision. Third, it is all right for whites to be a minority; it is all right for whites not to be in charge. The experiences of white students at predominantly black schools have generally resulted in their learning more about themselves and about racial relations. Finally, to implement these new ideas, they must first be encoded in public policy and law. We now need policy regarding the desegregation of public school faculties and policymaking school boards. A diversified policymaking structure can resolve issues around the conference table that are now fought in the court and in the street. (KH)

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OLD AND NEW IDEAS ABOUT SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

By

Charles V. Willie

Professor of Education and Urban Studies

Harvard Graduate School of Education

Abstract from a set of papers on equity and equality in education prepared for the KEDS Desegregation Assistance Center for use in working with selected Ohio school districts.

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Old and New Ideas About School Desegregation

Presented are some old ideas and new ideas about school desegregation. They are derived from two sources: the findings of the National Review Panel on School Desegregation Research as summarized and reported by Willis Hawley and findings from my own research.

Old Ideas

First, the old ideas. Willis Hawley, Dean of the Peabody School of Education, reports that school desegregation is most effective when these nine conditions prevail:

1. Classroom assignments result in racially balanced student populations, with no groups overwhelming the others;
2. Students who perform at or above grade level are in each classroom;
3. Sustained interaction between the races is encouraged in academic and extracurricular activities;
4. Rigid forms of tracking and ability-grouping are avoided;
5. A racially diversified group of relatively unprejudiced teachers and principals are recruited;
6. Parents are involved in all school affairs;
7. Staff development programs pertaining to desegregation are initiated;
8. Student attendance zones are stabilized so that student-teacher relationships can grow;
9. A multi-ethnic curriculum is developed (Hawley, 1981:148-157).

A careful review of effective school desegregation plans reveals that they include most of these features.

Based on my own observations and studies in several communities more old ideas are listed.

1. Busing is a phoney issue in that there is no correlation between what one learns and how one gets to school; most school systems cannot operate effectively and efficiently without using some form of transportation;
2. Community turbulence is less severe and violence is least experienced in places where political leaders and school officials state that desegregation court orders are lawful and that violation of the law will not be tolerated (Willie, 1978:86; Willie and Greenblatt, 1981:338-340).

New Ideas

And now a few new ideas. School desegregation has worked; busing has been effective. All other methods and techniques for bringing the races together in our schools have enhanced the education of students.

To professional educators this may not be a new idea. But to the public it is. And it must be repeated again and again to overcome the well orchestrated propaganda against busing that has flooded our nation in recent years. At all levels of our society, including the Executive branch of the federal government, we have been told a big lie by respectable persons that "busing has not worked."

It is incumbent upon us who know better to contradict this falsehood. We must state clearly and without equivocation that school desegregation has worked, including that facilitated by busing and other forms of transportation.

Consider these few facts about the participation of the minority population in education:

1. Back in 1940 before the Brown decision, the median school year completed by whites was 53 percent higher than that of blacks. But by 1979, 25 years after Brown, the median school year completed by the majority was only 3 percent above that of the minority.
2. Back in 1940 before the Brown decision, of all blacks 25 years of age and over only 7 or 8 percent had graduated from high school. By 1979, 25 years after Brown, a majority of black adults over 25 years were high school graduates.
3. Back in 1940 before the Brown decision, less than 2 percent of blacks over 25 years had graduated from college. But by 1979, 25 years after Brown, 10 to 11 percent of all black adults had earned college degrees.
4. In summary, the median school year completed by blacks increased from 5.7 years in 1940 to 12.1 years in 1979. This represents a 110 percent increase in less than a half century (National Center, 1980:16).

On the basis of these facts, we may state unequivocally not only that busing has worked but that litigation in the court for school desegregation worked, that demonstration in the streets for school desegregation worked, and that legislation by the Congress for school desegregation worked. These actions increased educational opportunities for minorities. Moreover, there has been a "dramatic 50 percent decline in the dropout rate of black students from 1967 to 1977, the period during which desegregation had its greatest impact" (Hawley, 1981:148).

David Cohen and Barbara Neufeld explain the success of school desegregation this way in their Summer 1981 Daedalus article. "Perhaps the most

single success of American public education has been providing nearly equal access to elementary and secondary school for all, an achievement quite distinct in human history" (Cohen and Neufeld, 1981:69).

It is difficult to understand why we insist on tarnishing with the propaganda of failure the victory of universal education that we have been able to achieve in this nation largely because of school desegregation.

The second new idea is this: School desegregation has benefitted whites as well as blacks and other minorities.

In 1940, for example, before Brown only one-third of the white adults over 25 years graduated from high school. In 1979, 25 years after Brown, the proportion of white high school graduates had doubled and represented almost two-thirds of those over 25 years. A national survey conducted the fall of 1978 revealed that 95 percent of all whites 5 to 6 years of age were enrolled in school, and 99 percent between the ages of 7 and 13 years; the proportion dropped 1 percentage point to 98 percent for those 14 to 15 years and to 89 percent for whites 16 to 17 years. In summary, between the ages of 5 and 19 more than 90 percent of all whites were in school (National Center, 1980:9). Thus the progress that we have experienced in achieving equal access to educational opportunities has helped the majority-group as well as minority-group students. At least we can conclude that the desegregation movement has not harmed the majority.

In Boston, school official James Dougherty told a newspaper reporter that school desegregation at South Boston High School had its positive side. He said, "The 'in' thing with blacks is going to college, and that was a boon to Southie, where almost no one goes [to college]. The very feeling [blacks] had about going on to college had a good effect on the white kids," according to the Boston school official. "The white kids have downgraded themselves, felt college was too tough or that they didn't have the ability,"

he said. "Now there is a feeling [among whites], reported Dougherty, "that 'if blacks are going [to college], why can't we.'" The Boston school said, "It's rubbed off on the white kids [of South Boston]," meaning, of course, the desire to go on to college (Craft, 1976:56). This illustration of a positive outcome of school desegregation for whites can be found in many places but often is overlooked. Usually, the statement that our media representatives make is that school desegregation has helped blacks, browns, other racial minorities and has not harmed whites. In the light of this customary way of reporting school desegregation effects, the idea that desegregation has helped the majority as well as the minority is indeed a new idea, an important idea.

A third new idea about desegregation: It is all right for whites to be a minority; it is all right for whites not to be in charge.

This idea is probably one of the most difficult to accept, even among professional educators. Some school superintendents have used the number of whites returning to the public school system as one indicator of the success of their administration. A white school official in Richmond, Virginia, told me that 'the white middle-class American will not submerge his values to those of an antithetical culture," and that the "white middle-class American will accept a 15 to 20 percent black population in his child's school if they are middle class" (Willie, 1981:29). Thus, the Richmond school board that supervised a school system that was 70 percent black in students tried to merge that system with Henrico and Chesterfield counties that were majority white. In the combined school district that was disallowed in court, whites again would have been the majority (Sartain and Dennis, 1981:229).

Little Rock, Arkansas where 66 percent of the public school students are black, responded to the fears of white parents "who," according to the New York Times, "were concerned that their children might be one of only two or three white children in certain classrooms." As a result of

parental pressure, the school board devised a plan that would guarantee at least 35 percent white children in a class. The plan was disallowed by the court, although the judge said that he sympathized with the board. The school officials said that they did not have any big problems in Little Rock, except "a paucity of white students" (Jaynes, 1981:30). The New York Times story about the Little Rock proposal had this headline: "Little Rock Schools, Trailblazers in Integration, Now Drawing Whites Back."

The newest desegregation idea on the street then is that it is all right for whites to be a minority. It is possible they may learn some things that they could not learn as a majority. Helen Hughes and Lewis Watts studied blacks who moved into white suburbs in the Boston metropolitan area and found that "with astonishing rapidity the self integrators' lives [took on] the character and tempo of the white suburbanites all about them" (quoted in Willie, 1981:81). One could predict such may happen with a beneficial outcome of whites who become minorities in predominantly black settings.

White students enrolled in predominantly black colleges said that they learned a great deal about race relations in this nation, that they now have no difficulty communicating with a person of a race that is different from their own, that they have learned about the aspirations of blacks, dismissed old stereotypes from their thinkings, and have overcome the tendency to deny that prejudice continues to exist. They no longer are apologists for the status quo (quoted in Willie, 1981:82). Whites on black college campuses said, they saw themselves for the first time in a different way.

Implementation of Ideas

Public schools probably will not experience the full effects of these old and new ideas about school desegregation unless various means for

implementing them are encoded in public policy and public law. By and large Americans are law abiding people. They will conform to desegregation law as they conformed to segregation law. Thus, it is important to formulate these ideas and guidelines for their implementation as public policy and public law.

As we now have public policy regarding the desegregation of student bodies in public schools, we also need public policy regarding the desegregation of faculties in public schools. Also we need public laws pertaining to the desegregation of policy-making school boards. With reference to desegregation of school boards, state education authorities should require the election of board members by single-member voting districts rather than at-large. Such elections are more likely to result in a diversified policy-making structure representative of the various group-interests in a community

A policy-making structure that is diversified can resolve issues around the conference table that now are fought in the court and in the street.

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